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How You Should Vote?

Philippians 4:4-13 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Luke 20:20-26 from The Message translation. [Spies were sent to Jesus] who posed as honest inquirers, hoping to trick him into saying something that would get him in trouble with the law. So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you're honest and straightforward when you teach, that you don't pander to anyone but teach the way of God accurately. Tell us: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" He knew they were laying for him and said, "Show me a coin. Now, this engraving, who does it look like and what does it say?" "Caesar," they said. Jesus said, "Then give Caesar what is his and give God what is his." Try as they might, they couldn't trap him into saying anything incriminating. His answer caught them off guard and left them speechless.

Well, I can only imagine how the conversations over the phone, and email, and Facebook, and text messaging and in the parking lot have lit up after I announced the title of this sermon. I can see it in some of your faces. Some of you are puzzled, "*How could he presume to do that?*" Some of you are less puzzled and more on the verge of anger: "*How dare he!?!*" Some of you think you are sure you know how I will vote and **fear** that I am going to tell you to do likewise. Others of you are equally sure you know how I will vote and you **hope** that I am going to tell you to do likewise. Some of you have had the thought cross your mind that partisan politics from the pulpit could endanger our church's charitable status. Some of you are so heartily sick of campaign

advertising and email and tv commercials and robo-calls that you are just incredulous and annoyed that it may seem that you are now going to get the same in the church. Some of you wonder if the Elders need to be put on-call for a stern conversation with the pastor about misuse of the pulpit.

Am I right? One of the longstanding and greatest and most wonderful traditions in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), that denominational family that we are proudly a part of, is freedom of the pulpit. In this or any congregation, we have long said that the anyone who is privileged to step into this pulpit on any given Sunday has the absolute right to speak from his or her heart and mind and soul. And it is precisely **because** of that long tradition that I would never do anything to unintentionally misuse that privilege. So, the first word is this: I am **NOT** going to tell you from this pulpit which candidate or candidates you should vote for. In conversation with you in response to a sincere inquiry, yes, I will be happy to share my views with you because voting is one of the greatest privileges we have as Americans. But never from this pulpit will I endorse or urge on you a vote for any particular candidate. That would indeed be a misuse of the pulpit and of the role of a minister of the gospel, and would be a betrayal of our Mission and Vision statement's commitment that "*we expect and respect a diversity of opinion.*" At the same time, I cannot **NOT** address this season of our civic life together. For surely this election is the elephant – no, the herd of elephants! – in the room. With almost one-**billion** dollars spent on advertising this year and countless trees destroyed to clutter your mailboxes and Facebook postings that seem non-stop politics and robo-calls that interrupt your dinner – for the preacher not to try to speak a word in the midst of what is truly on our hearts and minds would be irresponsible. Many studies, in fact,

of church members and ministers and sermons suggest that people **want** the preacher to **not** ignore the issues of the day, but to try, anyway, to speak a Christian word in the midst of those issues that might indeed be helpful. So, with some fear and some trepidation, that is what I want to do this morning and offer you three ideas in response to the topic *“How You Should Vote”*:

I can remember once announcing to our teenage daughter, *“Well, I need to go mow the lawn and also start working on my sermon.”* In her laconic way, she looked at me and said simply *“Don’t get them confused.”* Indeed. Neither task would likely be improved if they were confused – or it would be a very noisy sermon or a very poor job of lawn-mowing. Likewise, throughout both Testaments, the voice of God through the prophets and the writers and Jesus Himself reminds you and me that we are never to get our identities as Christians and our identities as citizens confused. Our nation is indeed a wondrous thing, the only country in the world, as more than one person has noted, which was founded not on ethnicity or tribe but on the power of a set of good and moral and ennobling ideas: that each person should be free and that everyone should have an equal opportunity in life unfettered by race or class or income. And that is our country at its finest - and when it has not been at its finest, those very ideas themselves call us forward to correct those places where those ideas are not being lived out.

But the country is not the gospel, the nation is not the faith. And when President Obama says - and when, likewise, Governor Romney has said, and Presidents Reagan and Clinton both said more than once themselves - that *“The United States is the ‘hope of the world’”* we are in danger of confusing something that should never be confused.

Yes, the country that we are privileged to be a part of and privileged to help make even more true to its founding values and ideas has been and continues to be a beacon of inspiration worldwide, but the ***Hope of the World*** is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is *Christ* who tells us of God's love for each and all in a season where sometimes shrill voices intimate that some folks are not as valuable as others, it is *Christ* who reminds us that we have an obligation to those who are the least of these, it is *Christ* who has promised us and has the ability to assure us that our lives will be eternally lived with God. **THAT** is our hope as Christians, and you and I should vote with that reminder always uppermost in our minds. For when we confuse country and Christ, nation and faith, it hurts both of them. As one writer has put it

To the best of my ability and understanding, I want my convictions about what it means to be a follower of Jesus to deeply...influence how I mark my ballots....

But I do not confuse the two; neither do I conflate them.... I am never confused about the absolute difference between being a follower of Jesus and an American – [for] Jesus said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not a worldly kingdom” and it is to his reign that I am bound.¹

So, first idea: our vote should always reflect the fact that we know that it is **God** who is the true hope of humankind. Let us indeed never get confused about that!

Second idea: Did you hear St. Paul's counsel to us? *“whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think*

¹<http://amkwpcprof.blogspot.com/2012/10/first-cupwhat-i-don't-understand.html> I am grateful to Barbara Blaisdell for pointing out this blog post to me.

about these things.” I want you to notice something: unlike, for example, the lane markings on I-25 in Denver at rush hour, Paul does not offer these merely as *suggestions*. No. Did you hear it? These are **imperatives**. ***Think on these things***. Period. He does not say, *“think on these things unless you are really annoyed by a certain candidate and then it’s okay to demean and demonize and dehumanize him or her.”* Because when you do that, the person that is hurt is **YOU**. Your ability to be a Christian is hobbled and hindered when you allow yourself to think on, dwell on, obsess on the nasty, the mean, on unfounded rumors; when you let hate dwell in you and thereby squeeze out the ability to be the best Christian you can be, to love even those - as Jesus *commanded* (again, not a suggestion but a *command!*) whom you would classify as your enemies, and, in fact, your heart is hardened and you are less able to love even those you want to love best.

So your vote should reflect the fact that as a Christian **you will not countenance** “trash talk” or the despicable dehumanizing of any candidate. In other words, your vote should be a reflection of the *best that you aspire to and that God calls you to – and not the worst that you are capable of*. **The best that you aspire to be, not the worst that you are capable of!** And so let me say bluntly: if you or I found ourselves going “*Hurrah!*” when one political commentator called the President a “retard” then we need to re-read our Paul and our Jesus and do instead as they command. Or if you find yourself getting excited and wanting to cheer when another political commentator claims that Governor Romney is no different than the Taliban,²

²<http://nastyjackbuzz.blogspot.com/2012/10/major-romney-embarrassment-mormons-wont.html>

then you need to re-read your Paul and your Jesus and do as they command. If you find yourself smiling when someone posts a PhotoShopped picture on Facebook of President Obama as a monkey - playing into an old and evil stereotype about African-Americans - or when someone PhotoShops the Governor as if he and his family were from the film *The Stepford Wives*, then you need to re-read our Paul and our Jesus and do as they command.

Finally, and in contrast, I offer a third idea about how you should vote and that is this: While it is true that you should never confuse Christ and country, it is nevertheless also the case that your Christian faith should never be separated from your choice about how to vote. The history of Christianity is marked with mentors and martyrs who, under the sway of their understanding of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, denounced and worked against the Roman Empire's practice of female infanticide, or at risk to themselves stood up against too many governments who wanted to persecute and even murder Jews and gays and the handicapped and anyone who was "different," or who stood up against evil empires that made it a crime to be Christian, or who said – sometimes at huge costs to themselves – that for a government to sanction human slavery is simply and utterly and odiously wrong. *Count the number of times* that the Bible speaks of the poor and of doing justice to the oppressed; *count the number of times* that Jesus reminds us that our neighbor is to be treated with fairness, justice, and kindness. And when governments help those things to happen, they are to be applauded. And when they don't, they are to be argued with at the ballot box and elsewhere. For, as the writer I quoted earlier says

I... invite my Christian friends to spend more time paying attention to Jesus, quit asking what he would do, start asking what he **did** do – and work really hard at adjusting [our] political agenda to be one that expresses what Christians say in church about our loving and forgiving and gracious God.³

But here is the thing: We Disciples, particularly, have known since our founding one-hundred and eighty years ago two things: that, yes, your faith absolutely ought to inform your voting, but, secondly, there WILL be times when mature, sincere, thoughtful Christians will disagree on how that ought to happen. Yes, your and my claim to follow a Lord who was born of an unwed mother, whose family had to flee for their lives as political refugees, whose understanding of God led Him to a death as the victim of unjustly-used governmental power mean that our faith **absolutely** ought to affect what we think about family planning and immigration and refugee issues and what the limits of governmental reach should be and what the role of governmental power should be. If your faith or mine doesn't prod us to think about these things – and not just echo the nasty, mean, shrill, over-simple soundbites all around us **then it is a faith that too cheap and it is too easy.**

But: we **WILL** disagree on the specifics. We will disagree on whom to vote for who will best carry out our beliefs and convictions about all these things and so much more. But the question that we have today and will have come Wednesday morning is this: *Will this season in our nation's life so have damaged us that we cannot come together around the Table of our Lord to celebrate his mercy to us together?* Jesus

³<http://amkwpcprof.blogspot.com/2012/10/first-cupwhat-i-don't-understand.html> Emphasis mine.

asked the question of those tricky ones who sought to trap him with a loaded question – gosh, that sounds like a Presidential campaign, doesn't it! - when He asked for that coin and then posed His own question: *Whose image is on this coin?* But you know what, that question is actually a much, much deeper question because I believe that what Jesus is finally saying to us with those words is the most crucial question that can be asked of us: *Whose image is on YOU? **That*** is the deepest question Jesus was asking those so long ago, and it is the question He addresses to us each and every day: *Whose image is on YOU.* When all is said and done in this season of our electoral lives, I hope that the answer will continue to be that it is the image of God through Jesus Christ who is stamped on your soul and mine. I don't want to bear the image of hateful anger to certain folks. I don't want the image that is on me to be forever tarnished by a campaign that has too often invited glee and gloating – from both sides – at the heights of nastiness and meanness that are abounding around us. When I see us gather for worship on a Sunday morning I want first of all to see not Republicans and Democrats but children of the living God who love one another, who contend *respectfully and thoughtfully and civilly* with one another, who never stoop to presuming the worst about one another, and who are thankful for each of those candidates who put themselves forward – whether they support them or not – to make this a better country, a better nation under God. That's the image that I want on you and me, and that's how I hope that we will vote.